

Prove It by lollercakes

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Summary:

Will is found but we're not free from the hold of the bad men. This is the story of what happens in between.

A collection of short stories that fill the space between S1 & S2.

1. Chapter 1

I'd only gone out for a smoke. A minute away from the caustic lighting and the recycled air that filled the waiting room was all that I'd needed, but I'd stepped outside and the car had come up beside me and I hadn't had a choice.

They'd brought me back to their lab headquarters on the edge of town to sign paperwork and get our stories aligned, or that's what I'd thought until the fifth hour passed and I realized I wasn't going home that night.

I was theirs and there was no arguing with these people. Not when everything I realized I now held dear was at its most vulnerable back in Hawkins Memorial. No, I'd happily give my future up to these monsters if it would keep that kid and his family safe. If it would keep Joyce safe.

Dammit. I didn't want to admit that. But what else did I have to think about on this miserable cot, the springs jabbing into my back in all sorts of places?

"Time to wake up, Chief," a man says stiffly from the doorway, fluorescent lighting spilling onto me.

"What time is it?" I grumble and get to my feet, keeping my distance. I wish they'd at least let me have a shower - I was still a right mess after the HAZMAT suit and all of the grime that I was exposed to on the Upside Down. They'd promised on the ride over that I'd get one, but I should have probably known better than to believe them.

“It’s time to shut the fuck up,” the man growls, his bruised face becoming familiar as I head past him and into the hallway.

Oh yeah, he’s the guard I clocked with his own gun. Peachy.

I don’t press him on more details, instead following as he leads me back to the interrogation room I remember from earlier. Inside is another tight-suited man with a miserable look on his face, his posture stiff as he looks over at me.

“Have a seat please, Jim,” he invites only to be followed up by the guard pushing me into the chair impatiently. “I’m glad you could join me - “

“Not much of a choice here,” I mumble and twist my knuckles under the table nervously.

“That’s right. You’re starting to understand it now. Let’s talk about what that means for the future,” he pauses and pulls out a folder, pushing it across the table towards me. “This is the last known location of another one of our science experiments, as you call them. She is currently travelling the country and executing innocent people, most recently in Pittsburgh. We need you to find her and eliminate her.”

I stare at him for a moment, certain I didn’t hear him right. He wants me to kill another kid? To expose them and destroy them, all because they don’t like that they got away?

“I know what you’re thinking, Jim, and yes, that is what we want. She cannot go unchecked and she needs to be taken out of the equation before she draws strings back to us. I checked up on your military record - it seems you already have a history of nasty action -”

“That isn’t what my record says. It was the other men in my platoon who committed those crimes and it very clearly outlines that.” I pause and run a hand through my hair, desperate to find a way out. “If I do this, are the Byers left alone? Can you promise that?”

“I’ll do the best that I can,” he smiles and it’s a malicious smile, one that spreads from ear to ear but shows no happiness beneath it.

“Fine. What do I do now?”

I find Kali Prasad in Pittsburg, living place to place and standing out like a sore thumb. I buy her coffee and a sandwich that she takes without question, scarfing it down in nearly two bites. I buy her a second sandwich and give her a warning. Tell her I’ll have to kill her if I can find her again.

She doesn’t blink, instead stares me down and watches me until I have to leave the diner, settling the bill at the counter before I go.

Returning to Hawkins I barely have time to settle down before I'm taken back to the lab and given my next mission. I take it in stride, careful to play my cards just right, but I hesitate when I think about how long this can go on. I only have so many days of vacation and I can't hide from Joyce much longer, not when she calls the station every couple of days to check in with me.

So I make up a story. I tell Flo my aunt out of state is sick, that my mom would roll over in her grave if I didn't help take care of her. She buys it but you can tell from the way she nods her head that she's suspicious, eyeing me as I head out the door of the station.

I make my way to Melvald's first, checking through the window to see if Joyce is working and to save me from having to deal with Betsy Carter who I never phoned back after our first and only date. Thankfully, Joyce is behind the counter and just finishing up a sale, a bright smile on her face that makes my heart skip in the way it just started to again since highschool.

"Hopper, I've been calling you," Joyce greets from her place behind the till, expression tight as she watches me step towards her.

"I know, sorry, it's been busy at the station lately," I lie knowing she wouldn't call me on it.

"Oh, well, okay. I thought you'd like to know Will is home and his symptoms are stabilizing," she pauses and stares up at me, her gaze distant.

"That's great Joyce," I reply honestly when she doesn't continue. "I

wanted to come and tell you I'll be out of town for a while. This aunt I have out of state is sick, I've got to go help her out and all."

"An out of state aunt? Hop, all your family lives in Indiana," she questions slowly and I shift on my feet, twisting my hat in my hands.

"Yeah - I mean, they used to all live here," I stretch the lie further and she looks away with a sad look on her face, a look that tells me she knows it's more than what I'm telling her. One that reminds me that she put her life on the line for this too.

"Can we talk about this in the back room for a moment?" Joyce sighs and tilts her head towards the door on her right. I follow her quickly and she closes the door behind us, trapping us in the dark room with all its shadows and knick knacks. "What are they making you do?"

I shrug and try to lean casually against the shelves but stop when the unit shakes threateningly. "Nothing. It's nothing Joyce. Really. Just an aunt."

"That's bullshit and you know it," she hisses under her breath, arms crossing over her chest in a move that's so Joyce it almost kills me. Reaching my hand out to rest on her shoulder she leans her cheek against it and sighs. "I don't want you to go, Hop. I'm worried about whatever it is they've got you dragged into now."

"I can take care of myself," I mumble and twist my hand until it's caught in her hair, fingers on her scalp. It's another quiet breath before she's crashing into me, her lips capturing mine in a kiss that knocks me back and into the shelves behind us, things tumbling to

the floor.

“Prove it. Come back alive.”

2. Chapter 2

The first stop after Melvald's is not the station or my trailer, but the hardware store. Old Walter behind the counter doesn't even blink when I drop a prefab wooden box on the counter along with humane animal traps, giving me the rundown of the happenings of mainstreet without any prompting.

"Thanks Walter," I bid when he finishes and head back to my truck, tossing the items on the passenger seat before climbing in. I spare a glance towards Melvald's again before turning the engine over, my eyes trying to see through the shine of the glass with no success. One last look is all I really wanted, just in case.

Turning my thoughts away from Joyce, my instincts tell me Eleven is still here in Hawkins. Flo's reports from this past week had told me as much, weird claims from local hunters that a rundown kid was popping out in the middle of the forest without any warning. Honestly, I hadn't expected her to still be around, not after all this time and with the cold weather snap we've been having, but all the signs point to the fact that she hasn't left just yet.

Heading out into the forest I setup the box where my old hunting blind used to be and deposit my first lure, a couple boxes of Eggos that I hope will defrost before she gets there, if she even comes.

I figure it's the least I can do before I leave again, unsure when I'll come back and if she'll even still be in town. A part of me hopes this is all in vain, that she will move on and find somewhere happier to be, but it likely won't happen. She has nowhere to go and no one to take her in and the thought kills me.

So I try not to think about it.

My next mission takes me westward, to Oregon and reports of a girl leading a group of bandits through a statewide hunt that comes up empty. By the time I get there the trail is cold, the group having already disappeared into the wind that whips the coastline every day.

I spend a few days longer there than I have to, tracing tips that I know will lead nowhere except maybe to give her an extra few days ahead of me. Part of me wonders as I slip into town after town, bar after bar, if the men at the lab know I'm helping lead them on a wild goose chase or if they simply don't care.

I like to think it's the second one, which is why I run up my expenses in each place as though I were almost living like a king. My plan was to keep the trail cold for as long as I could and play up the fact that my reputation was shit and my skills as a cop, despite in reality being pretty good, were for this case specifically, garbage.

There was no way I was going to help them sink their teeth back into another kid. I already could barely get through the night without coming up on another nightmare of them taking Eleven back only to be tortured for the rest of her days. The decision to sell her up the river, even though in a way it had to be done, haunted me and I wasn't sure I'd ever really forgive myself.

No. I had to find a way to actively thwart the lab while still

maintaining their trust and playing along for as long as I could. If that meant trying to find this girl again and spending weeks doing it, that was okay by me.

The snap of a twig behind me as I head out of the forest has me spinning with my hand on my gun, the tiny girl poking her head around the tree and staring at me with eyes as wide as a doe's, like she wasn't expecting me.

"I'm not going to hurt you, kid," I say lowly, lifting my hands in the air and away from my gun. I can see, even from this distance, that she's shivering, her tiny frame vibrating as she watches me. The sight of it makes my chest constrict and it reminds me of watching Sara shiver the first snow after her treatments started. The memory physically hurts and I have to close my eyes before continuing. "I have a place you can stay, if you want it. You'll be safe there."

She doesn't move from her spot behind the tree, but her eyes shutter as though she's imagining what it would be like to be warm again. I take the chance and step towards her, my feet crunching in the snow and breaking her from her reverie. The movement doesn't go unnoticed and she bolts back further into the forest, though not far enough that I can't see her.

"Look, Eleven," I sigh and chew my lip, desperate for a way to convince her that I'm not one of the bad men.

"El," she says, just beyond a tree. The sound carries and I squint towards her, arms lowering slightly.

“What’s that?” I take another step and she doesn’t run away, instead taking a minute step towards me.

“My... name. El,” her voice wobbles and her arms wrap around her chest, body shaking harder. All I want is to give her my coat, give her something to make those shivers stop, but she’s still five steps too far.

“I know the last thing you want to do is trust me, but if you come with me, I’ll help you, okay?” I offer, my hand pulling off my hat before dropping my arms to my side. We stay like that for another drawn out moment, an unspoken agreement between us being reached until she’s standing before me, expectant.

I lead her back to the truck and pull out my emergency survival gear, handing her the heavy wool blanket before opening the door for her. She struggles to climb up and I don’t hesitate to grab her by the hips, the misread of the situation proving vicious as I’m slammed into the ground, El scrambling up into the truck and glaring back at me with a trail of blood appearing from her nose.

We stay like that for another moment, frozen as the careful arrangement fluxuates and expands with our strangled breaths. Only when her face softens do I move to stand up, brushing the snow from my pants and handing her back the blanket she’d dropped in her effort to throw me back.

“I’m not them, El,” I say as I hold the door open, my gaze never wavering from hers. She blinks and her face crumbles to tears, the shivering overwhelming her as she starts to cry in earnest. I close the door slowly and make my way around the truck to the driver’s side,

pulling myself into the seat and turning the heat up to full blast for her. Wrapping the blanket around her shoulders she curls against the dash and turns her head towards me, a small hand creeping across the seat.

I don't hesitate before putting the truck in drive and sliding my hand around her icy palm.

"I'm leaving town for a few days, so I brought you some groceries. You remember how to use the microwave and the toaster?" I mumble as I set the bags on the counter, El slowly coming towards me from her place on the couch.

Despite the fact that she's been living in my dad's cabin for a week now, she still gives me a wide berth when I come around, her eyes always staring at me as though she's unsure whether this is real or not. I try not to take it personally, but deep down it bothers me that she's had to develop this distance when it comes to people.

"If I'm not back by this day on the calendar - " I pause and point to Sunday, my targeted return date and the day before she'll run out of food. "Then I'll contact you on the radio with what to do next, okay?"

She nods slowly before looking at the floor, tapping her toe against the floorboard. When she looks up again her expression is tight. "Joyce?" She questions tentatively, carefully.

“What?” I counter, picking my jaw up off the floor at her response. She rarely talks, at least not since that first meeting in the woods.

“Send Joyce? To help?” She’s trying to hide the hopeful look she has but is failing, the emotions apparent on her features.

“No. Sorry kid, I can’t tell Joyce about you yet. The bad men are still watching her and it would put you at risk. I’ll be back. I promise,” I add quietly, even though I know I shouldn’t. Promises are serious business for us and it’s a risk to even bring them up. I try not to notice that her face falls at that, my own feelings for Joyce bubbling to the surface at her mention.

Though I’d been back and forth to town a few times since taking on these missions, I’d kept to myself mostly since El came out of the woods that day. It had pained me to not follow-up on the kiss Joyce and I had shared but I’d told myself it was to protect her and Will, to keep the lab at bay for as long as I could. She’d taken the rejection in stride, apparently, Flo having informed me not so bluntly that she’d seen Joyce out on not one but two dates with Bob Newby, a local guy we’d grown up with.

It had stung, deeply, but I’d been in no position to make a move with everything going on. I’d gone and gotten groceries for El instead of marching over to Melveld’s like I’d wanted, even springing for the new chocolate chip Eggos in a need to appease at least one of the girls in my life. And standing here now the reward was almost enough as El pulled out the package and smiled carefully towards me.

3. Chapter 3

“Can I get a beer and some fries?” I ask with a groan, settling onto a barstool in some rundown place on the side of highway 94 outside of Bismarck, North Dakota.

“Sure thing - opening a tab?” The bartender replies as he sets down a coaster and reaches for a pint glass.

“Definitely. Staying just up the road and the Rockport so I’m going to drag my ass out of here only when I have to,” I add before flipping the coaster on the counter. I watch the TV tucked in the corner, the news replaying local stories that don’t interest me in the least but give me something to stare at that isn’t the brunette at the end of the bar that reminds me a little too much of Joyce back home.

“Here you go, sir.” My beer is set before me and I’m left to my own thoughts, the mood of them drifting up and down as the drink starts to disappear. I’m near into my third round when the fries eventually make it to the counter before me, hot and covered in cajun spice, and I tuck into them like a starving man.

Sometime throughout the night the woman comes to sit beside me, her perfume fogging up my senses and her face blurring in my vision. I’m pretty sure I buy her a drink, or two, because when I stumble out of the place not too long after she’s hanging off my arm as though we were familiar on intimate terms.

My drunk ass nearly makes that the truth when she follows me back to my hotel and pushes into my room, hands and lips pressed up against me.

If this had been two months ago, hell, a couple weeks ago, maybe I wouldn't have stepped aside and rubbed her lipstick from my lips. Maybe I'd have torn off her clothes and taken her to bed without much fanfare. But a tiny woman who'd shoved me up against a shelving unit held my head and my body in her vise grip and I didn't know how to deal with it.

The woman leaves without much prompting after that, a few choice words hurled at me as my hazed mind wanders to memories from high school I don't know how to deal with. So I crawl into the shower and let my hands sort me out before passing out on the comforter with a towel wrapped around my waist.

Time moves faster on the road and soon it's been over a week since I left Hawkins and El, her groceries going to be running low soon. When still no sign of the girl is reported by me, or anyone else for that matter, they let me head home with the promise that I need to be ready to go when they call me for the next round.

And home I go - first to the station to check in with Flo and then on to the store where I pick up another batch of groceries for the cabin. It's leaving there that I eventually run into Joyce and Bob, the man holding a pizza box ahead of him and nearly walking into me as I come through the automatic doors.

"Hey, sorry man - oh, Chief!" Bob rambles, eyes widening as they run from my uniform jacket to my face.

“Bob,” I acknowledge, gaze staying trained on Joyce as my mouth runs dry. Seeing them together is worse than I’d imagined, but the way she smiles, as though she’s lighter in her step these days, makes it almost okay. “Hey Joyce. Big plans tonight?”

“What? Oh - ha, I’d say so. It’s movie night,” Bob replies, smiling broadly as he looks between us. “Joyce gets to pick tonight and I’m trying to convince her National Lampoon’s Vacation is the way to go.”

I smile tightly as I watch her cringe at the suggestion - Joyce was more of a thriller type, if I remember correctly - and she has to clear her throat before glancing away and at the ground. “Yep. I can’t get enough of the Griswold’s,” she adds quietly.

“Sounds like a good night,” I offer, even though it doesn’t really. Or maybe that’s just my jealousy talking.

“Yeah - Bob, maybe we should get going? The pizza’s getting cold,” Joyce mumbles and steps back and away from me, wide eyes blinking at the man beside her.

“Sure thing! I’m sure the boys will want to dig in while it’s still hot,” Bob adds and lifts his hand in goodbye. I nod in return and watch as they head off, Bob’s arm wrapping around Joyce’s shoulders with a small squeeze as they move through the aisle of the store.

I’m standing there for too long, I realize, as the next customer nearly runs into me with her cart, the baby in the front squealing in delight. Apologizing, I head quickly to my truck and try to wipe the thoughts

from my mind, Joyce and her new man making an ache I hadn't known I had in me grow like a shadow.

My thoughts are not less cloudy when I arrive at the cabin, knocking brusquely before remembering I have to do the special knock. The locks click not long after that and I step in with my bags to find the place nearly torn apart, items broken and furniture askew across the floor.

"El?" I ask carefully, surprised to not find her on the couch in front of the TV. My anxiety grows when still she doesn't appear, the cabin quiet beyond the chaos. "Hey kid - It's Sunday and I'm back on time. Are you hiding out in your room?"

"Yes," her small voice calls out from behind the door, my shoulders relaxing slightly. I set down the bags and approach slowly, tapping on the wood before leaning against the wall.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes." It's nearly a whisper, but I seize on it, turning the handle and pushing my way into the room. I come up short when I see her curled up on the bed, her blanket wrapped tightly around her protectively

"What happened out there, kid?" I ask from the doorway and there's no anger hidden behind my words, only concern for a girl who's been through too much.

"Angry," she mumbles, the pieces falling into place.

“But you’re okay?” I shove aside the damage - it’s all superficial anyways - and focus on the real thing that’s broken here.

“I was sad. I’m sorry,” El whispers, the emotion there breaking me.

“It’s alright. I’m just glad to see you. I think I’m going to be around for a couple days at least. Do you think it would be okay for me to stay here with you?” She sits up at that and looks at me, the tufts of her slowly growing out hair pointing in all directions.

“You won’t leave?”

“Nah. I don’t think so. At least not for a few days. I can setup the spare bed in the living room, sleep there. We can work on some things around the cabin, get you outside and into the sunshine for a couple hours. How does that sound?” I offer and when she nods I’m thankful to have found some ray of light in this day.

4. Chapter 4

“Where have you been?” Joyce scolds from the steps to my trailer, standing up with a burst and her arm flung out ahead of her. There’s fury on her face and something else, something scared, and it knocks my stomach into my throat.

“Is everything okay? Is Will alright?” I panic and jog towards her, breath hanging in the air above me.

“What? Will is fine! Where were you? I called for like half the night and I’ve been here for hours, Hop!” She shouts angrily and pokes her finger into my chest hard enough to bruise. I grab at her hand abruptly and hold it in mine, blinking down at her for a second as I realize she wasn’t in crisis, she was just upset.

“I was out,” I reply lamely, lost for an explanation. It doesn’t appease her and she rolls her eyes before sneering at me, ripping her hand out of mine.

“God, I should have known. You’re the goddamn town slut! Of course you wouldn’t be here -”

“Joyce, I wasn’t - “

“You’re in the same clothes I saw you in yesterday, Hopper. Don’t tell me you weren’t at some woman’s house all night!” Her voice rises an octave and she spins away from me, arms lifting above her and into the air. “I should have fucking realized...”

"You're with Bob the Brain! What do you even care?" I snap and it's one step too far, her shoulders slumping and a sob hiccuping out of her.

"You've disappeared from my life again. Like when we were teenagers. Just left. Can't even be bothered to call - what did you expect from me? To wait around for the rest of my life until -"

"It isn't - I didn't - Joyce, look at me," I ask quietly, the sounds of the morning encroaching in on us. She turns and glares through tears at my request, arms crossed over her chest defensively. Stepping towards her tentatively I rest my hands on her shoulders and duck my head down to her level. When she doesn't move away or recoil I lean in and capture her lips with mine, the kiss ghosting across her lips.

She doesn't say a thing and I nearly pull away, defeated, before she tugs me back down to her and stumbles up against the wall of the trailer. I take advantage of the move and press against her, trapping her, until her hands are under my shirt and on my skin and running hot trails over my chest. There's no protest - no argument to keep us at bay - before I'm hard against her hip and nipping at her neck, fingers tangled in her hair.

Behind us the sound of a rifle exploding has me jolting up and away instinctively, swinging around to scan the treeline with my hand on my gun. The breaths escaping from me are quick and short, my mind buzzing with the taste of her and the adrenaline from the gunshot.

"It's probably just hunters," Joyce says from her place at my back,

voice small. When I turn to see her she's running her hands through her disheveled hair and trying to right it, gaze averting mine. The moment is lost, but neither of us want to admit it, or the fact that this thing between us hasn't diminished.

"Probably right. Look, Joyce," I start, her head shaking.

"I'm with Bob now," she counters and then it's my turn to roll my eyes, the passion between us just moments ago still very fresh and alive in my mind.

"And you accuse me of sleeping around." The joke is out of my mouth and I'm full of regret as I watch it slap across her face, hurt flashing behind her eyes. My stomach drops and I stumble over my words to take it back - to pull in the accusation - but nothing works. She just shakes her head and pushes past me, sliding into her car without so much as a goodbye.

The gunshot wasn't some rogue hunter out for a morning round, but a man in a suit who appears out of the forest the moment Joyce's car disappears out of the driveway. Pulling my own gun out of my holster I hold it at my side, grip tight as I watch him approach.

"Chief Hopper?" The man greets, tucking his pistol away and watching me like a hawk.

“Who’s asking?” I shout back, defensive.

“We’ve got another mission for you. Didn’t want you to get too carried away there,” he adds with a hollow chuckle.

“I just got back yesterday. I was told I would have a few days.” The argument is out of me before I can think it through, my mind still caught up in the tangle of Joyce and the feel of her against me. It drags at my thoughts and fogs my mind until I can’t think straight and all I want is a drink and to be left alone in the uncomplicated mess that is my trailer.

“We told you to be ready when we needed you next. We’re sending you to Chicago as we think she’s re-surfaced there. You need to be on the road by noon, or I can get in my car and head on over to the Byers’ and knock on Joyce’s door. I’m sure she’ll - “

“I’ll fucking kill you,” I interrupt, clicking the safety of my gun as a roar grows in my ears.

“I’d like to see you try. Here’s the details we have. Finish it up this time, okay?” He quips and heads back down the driveway with a pop in his step, a car starting up as he clears the treeline I grind my teeth as I watch him go, twisting my head to crack my neck and release the tension that I’ve held there since the gunshot.

When he’s finally out of sight I dip into the trailer and start grabbing my clothes, packing up a few fresh shirts and underwear. It’s not hard to miss that I need to do laundry and probably should pick up some real clothes for El eventually. She has to be getting tired of the lost

and found items and a few pieces from my wardrobe that I'd formed into some semblance of clothing for her. Maybe that's how I'll spend my time in Chicago *not* looking up this girl again.

Fuck. I didn't want to go. El had seemed almost conversational after I had stuck around last night, her vocabulary finally starting to gain some traction and her explanations making more sense with every passing day. She needed someone to interact with to not only learn more, but to keep from growing crazy and I wanted to help her. I owed her.

But I couldn't stop performing tricks for these monsters - I couldn't put Joyce and her family at risk for whatever reason. I was stuck.

Thankfully, the phone on the wall breaks me from my thoughts and I turn to look at it. There was no way I was going to pick it up - nobody ever had good things to say over the phone. Throwing into the bag a few more items, I head back out to my truck and pull out of the driveway in a rush.

I don't head straight back to the cabin, careful in the event someone is following me. Instead I head up the highway towards Chicago for twenty minutes before looping back around and taking the backroads all the way to Hawkins. El is wide-eyed when I appear back in the small space, watching me from over the back of the couch as I set my bag on the table and unzip it. My hands make quick work of unloading a couple of Sara's old books and toys that I'd held on to, setting them all on the table as though they were fragile gifts.

"What is it?" El asks after a moment, moving closer and staring at the colourful items.

“Things to play with. A couple books I’d like you to try to read, if you want. I’m sorry,” I add as I zip the bag back up and crouch down to her level, her expression curious. “I have to leave again. I’m going to try to make this the last time, okay?”

Her expression shutters at the mention of me leaving, a slight scowl forming behind her carefully controlled brow. In the end she simply shrugs her shoulders and reaches for one of the items on the table, heading back to the couch and the TV that is playing old movie reruns. Trying not to take it personally, I focus on the task at hand and complete a final check of the food and water barrel before heading back to the truck. With a parting glance at the cabin as I pull away I don’t miss sight of the little girl whose head is visible around the edge of the curtain, her hand pressed up against the glass. It’s the image that trails me all the way to the Windy City.

5. Chapter 5

“Policeman.” The voice says quietly behind me, an edge of a threat as something is pressed into the back of my hip. I set down the overalls and plaid shirt I’d crushed under my arm, turning my head to look over my shoulder. Behind me, Kali Prasad is standing closely behind me, a spray of purple popping in her dark slash of hair.

“I was wondering when I would see you again,” I sigh and twist, freezing when the blade poking into my back rips through my shirt and dips into my skin. This was the last place I’d expected to find her after a few days of playing cat and mouse across the factory sprawl of southern Chicago.

“And here we are,” she adds with a lilt to her words, hand coming up to shift through the clothes I’d just set down. “Turn around, Policeman.”

Doing as I’m told, I face her head on and ignore the bite of the knife above my belt buckle. Her smile is bitter and tight, eyes bright with the feeling of a successful capture. I’m tempted to call her on her bluff and see if she’ll actually use the blade, but a part of me remembers that little girl out in the woods who would have no one again if I didn’t make it back.

“Are you here to take me back? To the rainbow room?” She asks lowly, bringing my thoughts back around while she lifts the clothing I’d abandoned up to the light. Her expression turns to one of confusion as she looks up at me, brows furled. “Or kill me?”

“I’m actually just here to shop,” I reply with a shrug and a roll of my

eyes. My skin starts to burn under the slice of the knife and I chew my cheek, hissing through the pain.

“If you’re working for them, you are not my friend. I thought we had an agreement when we last parted ways?”

“No - I told you that if I saw you again, I’d have no choice but to take you out. We had agreed that you would stay below the radar and not make it easy for them to send me back to where you were. But here I am.” I look beyond her to the group of punks in the menswear section, their gazes landing over here too frequently for them not to be travelling as a pack. “I don’t want to see you. I’m just trying to buy some clothes.” She takes my words and ponders them for a moment, her hand dropping away from my waist and back to her side.

“I will never go back there, Policeman. I would die before I went back there,” she says so lowly I almost don’t hear it.

“I don’t want to take you back. But I need to keep my family safe,” I add and frown, watching as she looks away. “Your file says you can make people imagine things that aren’t real. Is that true?”

“And if it is?”

“What if we made it look real? What if we made you appear to be off the books for good?” It’s risky proposing this here, out in the open where anyone could be watching. But that’s also what makes it perfect - we can see everyone around us and there’s no way for them to know what we’re planning.

Kali takes the suggestion and looks back at her misfit crew, lip between her teeth in a move that breaks her tough-guy act clear through. "Fake my death?"

"Exactly."

We make a plan in the mall's cafeteria, agreeing to meet later that night as the crowds thicken near the hockey arena. It's simple enough - I'll chase her into the street and she'll fake the impact of a car running her over, the story likely to play out on every major news station across the state. Using that story we'll both be free - at least that's what I hope - and we can live our lives free of each other and the game we're being forced to play.

I leave the mall with hope and determination, a bag full of children's attire wrapped up in men's shirts tucked under my arm.

It works. It fucking works and it's vicious and beautiful and horrible all in one quick go. I blink and when I open my eyes my heart is in my throat and Kali is sprawled across the ground, blood leaking from her ears and eyes with bones misaligned and at angles unnatural to the human form. Her friends are at her side, accusing and screaming bloody murder at me as I stand on the edge of the sidewalk in the horde of people staring at the horror before them.

Beyond us the car squeals away - another of Kali's friends behind the

wheel - and the scene shudders in a way that if you weren't in on the game you wouldn't even notice. Another blink and I look up to see Kali brushing off her pants and nodding towards me, blood and gore gone from her body.

I fight my way out of the crowd as they disappear across the street, watching as the camera truck pulls up and focuses in on the body in the road that isn't real, the reporter stumbling in the street and asking the crowd what happened. The grin that spreads across my face is wide, a weight lifting from my shoulders as I duck into the alley where I'd parked my truck.

The call to my man at the lab is frenzied and breathless, the man on the other end furiously asking for details and confirmations. I tell him I'm going to the hospital to confirm, that I'm going to make sure it's done, but really I pull off the highway at a rundown motel and hideout in a room for the night.

I don't sleep, playing up the chaos angle before pulling up to the lab's gate, passing through security with a wave from the guard who is expecting me. Hair askew and eyes bloodshot, I ramble through my report and swallow two ibuprofens that I play off as Tuinal even though I've been off of them since Will went missing months ago.

Handing over the morgue report I'd forged from the hospital, I watch as they pour over the details and look at me suspiciously in between sentences. When they finally stop their questions, closing the folder before them, they nod and the security guard opens the door with a scowl.

"And Chief," he pauses, watching me from his chair. "Keep your head down."

The threat is there and heavy between us and I nod my acknowledgement, escaping into the hallway and into my tentative freedom.

I hold my breath all the way to the parking lot, eyes scanning the hallways anxiously as I go.

The fresh air of outside has never felt so sweet, my walk across the parking lot lighter as the morning light breaks through the trees surrounding the lab. I pull a cigarette from my pack and light it up, sucking in the smoke that relaxes me. Climbing into my truck I grip the wheel and rest my forehead against it, a heavy sigh escaping from my chest as my knuckles release the tension they'd been holding for months.

Finally.

Finally .

My hands fumble with the radio as my cigarette wobbles between my lips, my voice cackling across the line as I call back to the cabin.

“I’ll be home soon,” I put out into the world, the cool plastic pressed against my cheek as I think of how to explain it. The risk of exposure is high and my mind is exhausted, words struggling to fit in a way that El would understand. So I repeat myself and turn the radio off with a snap.

Turning over the engine I jerk the car into reverse and press my foot on the gas, desperate to get out of here and leave this place behind. It doesn't work out that way. Halfway out of my spot I have to slam on the breaks, Joyce's Pinto pulling in behind me as though she were parking at the mall. The sight of her here in this lot makes that feeling of lightness disappear, dread filling my gut as I watch her park and climb out of her car.

"Joyce?" I shout across the lot, stepping out of the truck and watching as her body twists towards me. Beside her Will is climbing out of the back seat, skin pale and hair ruffled.

"Hopper?" She replies, breathless and low.

"What's wrong? Will? Are you okay?" I question after quick stepping to meet them, crouching down to the boy's level and running my hand through his hair. He's dazed, dark circles below his eyes as he looks at me wearily.

"He's waking up every night screaming and keeps seeing things," Joyce adds from above me, anxiety lacing her words. "The doctors in town couldn't help us so I contacted the men who did this to him in the first place."

"They're just nightmares, Mom," Will whispers hoarsely, his voice like sandpaper.

"No hunny, they're not," she replies and closes her eyes, breathing

through the stress.

My mouth goes dry at the realization that despite everything I'd done to keep them safe, to keep them away from the stranglehold of this place, it was useless. They were back here because of what they'd been through and they had no other choice, trapped by the monsters that held them.

"Is it Brenner? Who you talked to?" Though I hadn't seen him in all my time reporting, the fear of his control still vibrated through me.

"No. The new doctor in control is Sam Owens. He came to the hospital last time we were there and told us to start coming here. I didn't want to Hop, but I didn't know what to do," she says with defeat in her tone, eyes piercing mine.

The reality that she'd been going to the hospital all this time, facing this problem alone, breaks me inside and I make a silent pact to myself to never make her deal with this alone, not anymore.

"I'm coming with you," I say and stand up straight, glaring at the building that holds us captive.

"You don't need to Hopper. I can handle this."

"I know you can, but you shouldn't have to. Will, do you mind if I come with you and your Mom?" I turn to the boy and watch as he shakes his head, a slight grin on his lips.

"She smiles when you're around. I think it would be good if you were here," he mumbles and reaches out to take his Mom's hand. Her face softens when she looks at him, tears filling her eyes as she runs her fingers across his forehead.

"Fine. I'm too tired to argue. Let's go in - we're already late."

I let Will lead the way, the boy fearless as he heads into the building before us. Instead I walk in step with Joyce, towering over her as she wraps her arms tightly across her chest, wind whipping her hair up off her neck. She looks so small in her oversized coat, eyes downcast with the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Debating with myself silently, I lift my hand three times from my side as we walk towards the door before I make a choice and settle my palm against her back. Her eyes shoot up to mine, eyebrows in her bangs, as she watches me carefully for a drawn out second. When she doesn't step away, doesn't recoil from my touch, I walk my fingers out to her shoulder and pull her into my side for a quick hug, hopefully giving her the strength to walk through these doors once more with the fire I know she has within her.

We'd both thought we'd beaten this place. That we were free. But we realized now that we couldn't do it alone and our kids needed us to fight for them, to fight together, or we would all be lost. Walking back through the doors of the lab I take Joyce's hand in mine and suck in a breath, steeling myself for what comes next.